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*The
Battle
of Life*

Henry Van Dyke

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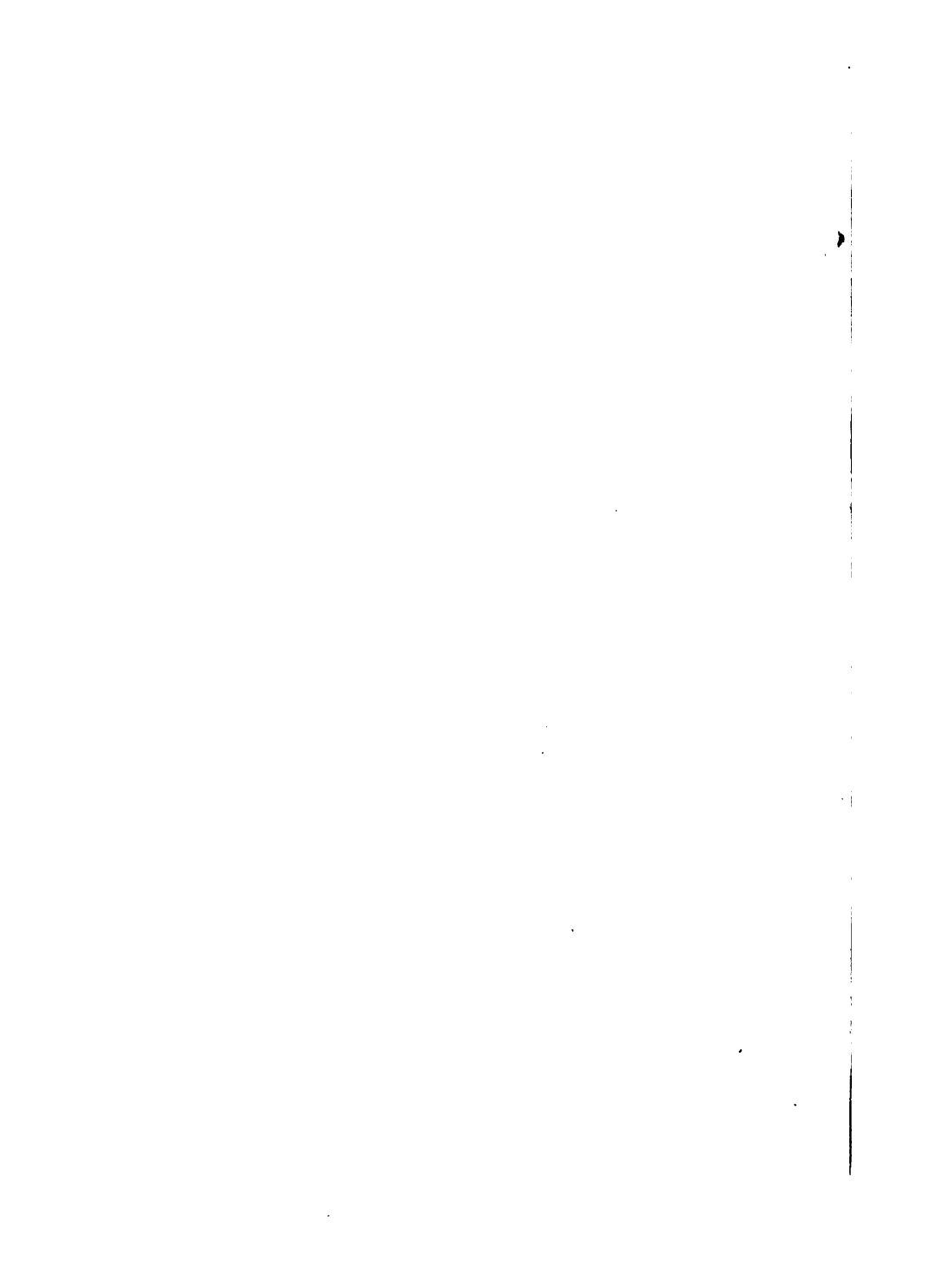
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THE BATTLE OF LIFE

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BY

HENRY VAN DYKE

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THE BATTLE OF LIFE

Romans xii. 21 : Overcome evil with good.

THE Battle of Life is an ancient phrase consecrated by use in Commencement Orations without number. Two modern expressions have taken their place beside it in our own day: the Strenuous Life, and the Simple Life.

Each of these phrases has its own significance and value. It is when they are overemphasized and driven to extremes that they lose their truth and become catch-words of folly. The simple life which blandly ignores all care and conflict, soon becomes flabby and invertebrate, sentimental, and gelati-

nous. The strenuous life which does everything with set jaws and clenched fists and fierce effort, soon becomes strained and violent, a prolonged nervous spasm.

Somewhere between these two extremes must lie the golden mean: a life that has strength and simplicity, courage and calm, power and peace. But how can we find this golden line and live along it? Some truth there must be in the old phrase which speaks of life as a battle. No conflict, no character. Without strife, a weak life. But what is the real meaning of the battle? What is the vital issue at stake? What are the things worth fighting for? In what spirit, with what weapons, are we to take our part in the warfare?

There is an answer to these questions

in the text: *Overcome evil with good.* The man who knows this text by heart, knows the secret of a life that is both strenuous and simple. For here we find the three things that we need most: a call to the real battle of life; a plan for the right campaign; and a promise of final victory.

I. Every man, like the knight in the old legend, is born on a field of battle. But the warfare is not carnal, it is spiritual. Not the east against the west, the north against the south, the "Haves" against the "Have-nots"; but the evil against the good,—that is the real conflict of life.

The attempt to deny or ignore this conflict has been the stock in trade of every false doctrine that has befogged and bewildered the world since the

days of Eden. The fairy tale that the old serpent told to Eve is a poetic symbol of the lie fundamental, — the theory that sin does not mean death, because it has no real existence and makes no real difference. This ancient falsehood has an infinite wardrobe of disguises.

You will find it pranked out in philosophic garb in the doctrines of those who teach that all things are linked together by necessity of nature or Divine will, and that nothing could ever have happened otherwise than just as it has come to pass. Such a theory of the universe blots out all difference between good and evil except in name. It leaves the fence-posts standing, but it takes away the rails, and throws everything into one field of the inevitable.

You will find the same falsehood in a more crude form in the popular teachings of what men call "the spirit of the age," the secular spirit. According to these doctrines the problem of civilization is merely a problem of ways and means. If society were better organized, if wealth were more equally distributed, if laws were changed, or perhaps abolished, all would be well. If everybody had a full dinner-pail, nobody need care about an empty heart. Human misery the secular spirit recognizes, but it absolutely ignores the fact that nine-tenths of human misery comes from human sin.

You will find the same falsehood disguised in sentimental costume in the very modern comedy of Christian Science, which dresses the denial of evil

in pastoral garb of white frock and pink ribbons, like an innocent shepherdess among her lambs. "Evil is nothing," says this wonderful Science. "It does not really exist. It is an illusion of mortal mind. Shut your eyes and it will vanish."

Yes, but open your eyes again and you will see it in the same place, in the same form, doing the same work. A most persistent nothing, a most powerful nothing! Not the shadow cast by the good, but the cloud that hides the sun and casts the shadow. Not the "silence implying sound," but the discord breaking the harmony. Evil is as real as the fire that burns you, as the flood that drowns you. Evil is as real as the typhoid germ that you can put under a microscope and see it squirm

and grow. Evil is negative,—yes, but it is a real negative,—as real as darkness, as real as death.

There are two things in every human heart which bear witness to the existence and reality of evil: first, our judgments of regret, and second, our judgments of condemnation.

How often we say to ourselves, "Would that this had not come to pass!" How often we feel in regard to our own actions, "Would that I had done differently!" This is the judgment of regret; and it is a silent witness of the heart to the conviction that some things are not inevitable. It is the confession that a battle has been lost which might have been won. It is the acknowledgment that things which are, but are not right, need not

have been, if we and our fellow-men had seen more clearly and followed more faithfully the guiding star of the good.

And then, out of the judgment of regret, springs the deeper judgment of condemnation. If the failure in duty was not inevitable, then it was base. The false word, the unjust deed, the foul action, seen as a surrender to evil, appears hateful and guilty. It deserves the indignation and the shame which attach to all treason. And the spirit which lies behind all these forms of disloyalty to the good,—the spirit which issues in selfishness and sensuality, cruelty and lust, intemperance and covetousness,—this animating spirit of evil which works against the Divine will and mars the peace and order of

the universe is the great Adversary against whom we must fight for our own lives and the life of the world.

All around us lies his dark, secret kingdom, tempting, threatening, assaulting the soul. To ignore it, is to walk blindfold among snares and pitfalls. Try, if you will, to shut it out, by wrapping your heart in dreams of beauty and joy, living in the fair regions of art or philosophy, reading only the books which speak of evil as if it did not exist or were only another form of goodness. Soon you will be shaken out of the dream into the reality. You will come into contact with evil so close, so loathsome, that you cannot deny it. You will see that it has its soldiers, its servants, its emissaries, as ardent and enthusiastic

in its cause as if they were serving the noblest of masters. It inspires literature and supports newspapers; now intelligent and cultured, drawing the arts into its service; now coarse and vulgar, with pictures that shock the taste as much as they debase the conscience. It wins adherents and turns them into advocates. It organizes the dealers in drunkenness and debauchery into powerful societies for mutual protection. It creates lobbies and controls legislatures. It corrupts the government of great cities and rots out the social life of small towns. Even when its outward manifestations are repressed and its grosser forms resisted, it steals its way into men's hearts, eating out the roots of human trust and brotherhood and kindness,

and filling the air with gossip and spite, envy, malice, and all uncharitableness.

I am glad that since we have to live in a world where evil exists, we have a religion which does not bandage our eyes. The first thing that we need to have religion do for us is to teach us to face the facts. No man can come into touch with the Divine personality of Jesus Christ, no man can listen to His teaching, without feeling that the distinction between good and evil to Him is vital and everlasting. The choice between them is to Him the great choice. The conflict between them is to Him the great conflict. Evil is the one thing that God has never willed. Good is the one thing that He wills forever. Evil is first

and last a rebellion against His will. He is altogether on the side of good. Much that is, is contrary to His will. There is a mighty strife going on, a battle with eternal issues, but not an eternal battle. The evil that is against Him shall be cast out and shall perish. The good that overcomes the evil shall live forever. And those who yield their lives to God and receive His righteousness in Christ are made partakers of everlasting life.

This is the teaching of Jesus: and I thank God for the honesty and virility of His religion which makes us face the facts and calls us to take a man's part in the real battle of life.

II. But what is the plan of campaign which Christianity sets before us? In what spirit and with what

weapons are we to enter the great conflict against the evil that is in the world?

The natural feeling of the heart in the presence of evil is wrath, and the natural weapon of wrath is force. To punish crime, to avenge wrong, to put down wickedness with a strong hand, — that is the first impulse of every one who has the instincts of manhood.

And as this is natural, so it is, also, within a certain sphere needful, and to a certain extent useful. Armies and navies exist, at least in theory, to prevent injustice among nations. Laws are made to punish wrong-doers. Courts, police-forces, and prisons are maintained to suppress evil with power.

But while we recognize this method

of dealing with evil as useful to a certain extent and necessary within a certain sphere, we must remember that it has its strict limitations.

First, it belongs to the state and not to the individual. When the private man assumes to punish evil with force he sanctions lynch-law, which is a terror to the innocent as well as to the guilty. Then we have the blood-feud and the vendetta, mob-rule and anarchy.

Second, the suppression of evil by force is only a temporary relief, a protection for the moment. It does not touch the root of the matter. You send the murderer out of the world by a regulated flash of lightning. But you do not send murder out of the world. To do that you must reach

and change the heart of Cain. You put the thief in prison, but when he comes out he will be ready to steal again, unless you can purify his conscience and control his will. You assault and overthrow some system of misgovernment, and "turn the rascals out." But unless you have something better to substitute, all you have done is to make room for a new set of rascals,—a new swarm of mosquitoes with fresh appetites and larger capacities.

Third, the method of fighting evil with force on its own ground often has a bad effect on those who follow it. Wrestle with a chimney-sweep, and you will need a bath. Throw back the mud that is thrown at you, and you will have dirty hands. Answer Shimei

when he curses you and you will echo his profanity. Many a man has entered a crusade against intemperance and proved himself as intemperate in his language as other men are in their potations. Many a man has attacked a bad cause with righteous indignation, and ended in a personal squabble with most unrighteous anger.

No, my brother-men, the best way to fight against evil is not to meet it on its own ground with its own weapons. There is a nobler method of warfare, a divine plan of campaign given to us in the religion of Christ. *Overcome evil with good.* This is the secret of the battle of life.

Evil is potent not so much because it has command of money and the "big battalions," but because it has control

of the hearts of men. It spreads because human hearts are lying fallow and ready to welcome the seeds of all kinds of weeds. It persists because too much of what we call virtue is negative, and selfish, and frost-bound, — cold storage virtue, — the poor piety which terminates in a trembling anxiety to save our own souls.

The way to counteract and conquer evil in the world is to give our own hearts to the dominion of good, and work the works of God while it is day. The strongest of all obstacles to the advance of evil is a clean and generous man, doing his duty from day to day, and winning others, by his cheerful fidelity, to serve the same Master. Diseases are not the only things that are contagious. Courage is contagious.

Kindness is contagious. Manly integrity is contagious. All the positive virtues, with red blood in their veins, are contagious. The heaviest blow that you can strike at the kingdom of evil is just to follow the advice which the dying Sir Walter Scott gave to his son-in-law, Lockhart: "Be a good man." And if you want to know how, there is but one perfect and supreme example,—the life of Him who not only did no evil, but went about doing good.

Now take that thought of fighting evil with good and apply it to our world and to ourselves.

Here are monstrous evils and vices in society. Let intemperance be the type of them all, because so many of the others are its children. Drunkenness ruins more homes and wrecks

more lives than war. How shall we oppose it? I do not say that we shall not pass resolutions and make laws against it. But I do say that we can never really conquer the evil in this way. I hold with Phillips Brooks that "all prohibitory measures are negative. That they have their uses no one can doubt. That they have their limits is just as clear."

The stronghold of intemperance lies in the vacancy and despair of men's minds. The way to attack it is to make the sober life beautiful and happy and full of interest. Teach your boys how to work, how to read, how to play, you fathers, before you send them to college, if you want to guard them against the temptations of strong drink and the many shames and

sorrows that go with it. Make the life of your community cheerful and pleasant and interesting, you reformers, provide men with recreation which will not harm them, if you want to take away the power of the gilded saloon and the grimy boozing-ken. Parks and playgrounds, libraries and music-rooms, clean homes and cheerful churches, — these are the efficient foes of intemperance. And the same thing is true of gambling and lubricity and all the other vices which drag men down by the lower side of their nature because the higher side has nothing to cling to, nothing to sustain it and hold it up.

What are you going to do, my brother-men, for this higher side of human life? What contribution are you going to make of your strength, your

time, your influence, your money, your self, to make a cleaner, fuller, happier, larger, nobler life possible for some of your fellow-men? I do not ask how you are going to do it. You may do it in business, in the law, in medicine, in the ministry, in teaching, in literature. But this is the question: What are you going to give personally to make the human life of the place where you do your work, purer, stronger, brighter, better, and more worth living? That will be your best part in the warfare against vice and crime.

The positive method is the only efficient way to combat intellectual error and spiritual evil. False doctrines are never argued out of the world. They are pushed back by the incoming of the truth as the darkness is pushed

back by the dawn. Phillips Brooks was right. It is not worth while to cross the street to break a man's idol. It is worth while to cross the ocean to tell him about God. The skilful fencer who attacks your doubts and drives you from corner to corner of unbelief and leaves you at last in doubt whether you doubt or not, does you a certain service. He gives you exercise, takes the conceit out of you. But the man who lays hold of the real faith that is hidden underneath your doubt, — the silent longing for God and goodness, the secret attraction that draws your heart toward Jesus Christ as the only one who has the words of everlasting life, — the man who takes hold of this buried faith and quickens it and makes you dare to try to live

by it,—ah, that is the man who helps you indeed. My brothers, if any of you are going to be preachers, remember this. What we men need is not so much an answer to our doubts, as more nourishment for our faith.

The positive method is the only way of victory in our struggle with the evil that dwells in our own nature and besets our own hearts. The reason why many men fail is because they thrust the vice out and then forget to lay hold on the virtue. They evict the unclean spirit and leave a vacant house. To cease to do evil is important, but to learn to do good is far more important. Reformation never saved a man. Transformation is the only way. And to be transformed, a man must welcome the Spirit of Good, the Holy

Spirit, into his heart, and work with Him every day, doing the will of God.

There are two ways of fighting fever. One is to dose the sick people with quinine and keep the fever down. The other is to drain the marshes, and purify the water, and cleanse the houses, and drive the fever out. Try negative, repressive religion, and you may live, but you will be an invalid. Try positive, vital religion, and you will be well.

There is an absorption of good that guards the soul against the infection of evil. There is a life of fellowship with Christ that can pass through the furnace of the world without the smell of fire on its garments, — a life that is full of interest, as His was, being ever about His Father's business; a life that

is free and generous and blessed, as His was, being spent in doing good, and refreshed by the sense of God's presence and approval.

Last summer I saw two streams emptying into the sea. One was a sluggish, niggardly rivulet, in a wide, fat, muddy bed; and every day the tide came in and drowned out that poor little stream, and filled it with bitter brine. The other was a vigorous, joyful, brimming mountain-river, fed from unfailing springs among the hills; and all the time it swept the salt water back before it and kept itself pure and sweet; and when the tide came in, it only made the fresh water rise higher and gather new strength by the delay; and ever the living stream poured forth into the

ocean its tribute of living water,—the symbol of that influence which keeps the ocean of life from turning into a Dead Sea of wickedness.

My brother-men, will you take that living stream as a type of your life in the world? The question for you is not what you are going to get out of the world, but what you are going to give to the world. The only way to meet and overcome the inflowing tide of evil is to roll against it the outflowing river of good.

My prayer for you is that you may receive from Christ not only the watchword of this nobler life, but also the power to fulfil it.



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